

Politics Behind the Sunni-Shia Conflict in Middle East

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Lately, it has become a habit of Orientalist apologists of Western imperialism to offer reductive historical and theological explanations of Sunni-Shi'a conflict in the Middle East region in order to cover up the blowback of ill-conceived Western military interventions and proxy wars that have ignited the flames of internecine conflict in the Islamic world.

Some self-anointed “Arabists” of the mainstream media posit that the division goes all the way back to the founding of Islam, 1400 years ago, and contend that the conflict emerged during the reign of the fourth caliph, Ali bin Abi Talib, in the seventh century A.D.

One wonders what would be the American-led war on terror’s explanation of such “erudite” historians of Islam – that the cause of “the clash of civilizations” between Christians and Muslims can be found in the Crusades when Richard the Lionheart and Saladin were skirmishing in the Levant and exchanging courtesies at the same time.

Fact of the matter is that in modern times, the Sunni-Shi’a conflict in the Middle East region is essentially a political conflict between the Gulf Arab autocrats and Iran for regional dominance which is being presented to lay Muslims in the veneer of religiosity.

Saudi Arabia, which has been vying for power as the leader of Sunni bloc against the Shi’a-led Iran in the regional geopolitics, was staunchly against the invasion of Iraq by the Bush Administration in 2003.

The Baathist regime of Saddam Hussein constituted a Sunni Arab bulwark against Iran’s meddling in the Arab world. But after Saddam was ousted from power in 2003 and subsequently when elections were held in Iraq which were swept by Shi’a-dominated parties, Iraq has now been led by a Shi’a-majority government that has become a steadfast regional ally of Iran. Consequently, Iran’s sphere of influence now extends all the way from territorially-contiguous Iraq and Syria to Lebanon and the Mediterranean coast.

Moreover, during the invasion of Iraq in 2003, the Bush Administration took advantage of the ethnic and sectarian divisions in Iraq and used the Kurds and Shi’as against the Sunni-led Baathist regime of Saddam Hussein. And during the occupation years from 2003 to 2011, the once dominant Sunni minority was politically marginalized which further exacerbated the ethnic and sectarian divisions in Iraq.

The Saudi royal family was resentful of Iran’s encroachment on the traditional Arab heartland. Therefore, when protests broke out against the Shi’a-led Syrian government in the wake of the Arab Spring uprisings of 2011, the Gulf states along with their regional Sunni allies, Turkey and Jordan, and the Western patrons gradually militarized the protests to dismantle the Iranian resistance axis.

A full-scale Sunni-Shi'a war has been going on in Syria, Iraq and Yemen for the last several years which will obviously have its repercussions all over the Islamic world where Sunni and Shi'a Muslims have coexisted in relative peace for centuries.

Notwithstanding, in order to create a semblance of objectivity and fairness, the American policymakers and analysts are always willing to accept the blame for the mistakes of the distant past that have no bearing on their present policy, however, any fact that impinges on their present policy is conveniently brushed aside.

In the case of the creation of the Islamic State, for instance, the US policy analysts are willing to concede that invading Iraq back in 2003 was a mistake that radicalized the Iraqi society, exacerbated sectarian divisions and gave birth to an unrelenting Sunni insurgency against the heavy-handed and discriminatory policies of the Shi'a-led Iraqi government.

Similarly, the war on terror era political commentators also "generously" accept the fact that the Cold War-era policy of nurturing al-Qaeda and myriads of Afghan so-called "freedom fighters" against the erstwhile Soviet Union was a mistake, because all those fait accompli have no bearing on their present policy.

The mainstream media's spin-doctors conveniently forget, however, that the creation of the Islamic State and myriads of other Sunni Arab jihadist groups in Syria and Iraq has as much to do with the unilateral invasion of Iraq back in 2003 under the Republican Bush administration as it has been the legacy of the Democratic Obama administration that funded, armed, trained and internationally legitimized the Sunni militants against the Shi'a-led Syrian government since 2011-onward in the wake of the Arab Spring uprisings in the Middle East and North Africa region.

In fact, the proximate cause behind the rise of the Islamic State, al-Nusra Front, Ahrar al-Sham, Jaysh al-Islam and numerous other Sunni Arab jihadist groups in Syria and Iraq was the Obama administration's policy of intervention through proxies in Syria.

The border between Syria and Iraq is highly porous and poorly guarded. The Obama administration's policy of nurturing militants against the Syrian government was bound to have its blowback in Iraq sooner or later. Therefore, as soon as the Islamic State consolidated its gains in Syria, it overran Mosul and Anbar in Iraq in early 2014 from where the US had withdrawn its troops only a couple of years ago in December 2011.

Apart from Syria and Iraq, two other flashpoints of Sunni-Shi'a conflict in the Middle East region are Bahrain and Yemen. When peaceful protests broke out against the Sunni monarchy in Bahrain by the Shi'a majority population in the wake of the Arab Spring uprisings in 2011, Saudi Arabia sent thousands of troops across the border to quell the uprising.

Similarly, when the Iran-backed Houthis, which is also an offshoot of Shi'a Islam, overran Sana'a in September 2014, Saudi Arabia and UAE mounted another ill-conceived Sunni-led offensive against the Houthi militia in Yemen in March 2015.

The nature of the conflict in Yemen is sectarian to an extent that last year, the Yemeni branch of al-Qaeda's leader Qasim al-Raymi claimed that al-Qaeda had been fighting hand in hand with the Saudi-led alliance against the Iran-backed rebels for the last three years.

The revelation hardly comes as a surprise, though, because after all al-Qaeda's official franchise in Syria, al-Nusra Front, has also been fighting hand in glove with the so-called "moderate" Syrian opposition against the Syrian government for the last eight years of the Syrian proxy war.

Furthermore, according to Pakistan's National Commission for Human Rights, 509 Shi'a Muslims belonging to the Hazara ethnic group had been killed in Pakistan's western city of Quetta since 2013. Although a southern Punjab-based sectarian militant outfit Lashkar-e-Jhangvi frequently claims responsibility for the massacre of Hazaras in Quetta, such claims are often misleading.

The hub of Lashkar-e-Jhangvi's power mostly lies in Punjab whereas the Balochistan province's provincial metropolis Quetta, which is almost three-hour drive from the Af-Pak border at Chaman, is regarded as the center of Taliban's activities.

After the American invasion and occupation of Afghanistan in 2001 with the help of the Northern Alliance, the top leadership of the Taliban has mostly settled in Quetta and its adjoining rural areas and Afghan refugee camps, hence it is called the Quetta Shura Taliban.

In order to understand the casus belli of the Taliban-Hazara conflict, it's worth noting that the leadership of the Hazara ethnic group has always taken the side of the Tajik and Uzbek-led Northern Alliance against the Pashtun-led Taliban.

The Taliban has committed several massacres of the Hazara people in Afghanistan, particularly following the 1997 massacre of 3,000 Taliban prisoners by the Uzbek warlord Abdul Malik Pahlawan in Mazar-i-Sharif thousands of Hazaras were massacred by the Taliban in the same city in August 1998 for betraying the Taliban.

The Hazara people are an ethnically Uzbek, Dari (Afghan Persian)-speaking ethnic group native to the Hazarajat region in central Afghanistan but roughly 600,000 Hazaras also live in Quetta, Pakistan. Although the conflict between the Taliban and Hazaras might appear religious and sectarian, the real reasons of the conflict are political in nature, as I have already described.

Now, when the fire of inter-sectarian strife is burning on several different fronts in the Middle East and the Sunni and Shi'a communities are witnessing a merciless slaughter of their brethren in Syria, Iraq, Yemen, Bahrain Afghanistan and Pakistan, then it would be preposterous to look for the causes of the conflict in theology and medieval history. If the Sunni and Shi'a Muslims were so thirsty for each other's blood since the founding of Islam, then how come they managed to survive as distinct sectarian groups for 1400 years?

Fact of the matter is that in modern times, the phenomena of Islamic radicalism, jihadism and consequent Sunni-Shi'a conflict are only as old as the Soviet-Afghan jihad during the 1980s when the Western powers with the help of their regional allies trained and armed Afghan jihadists to battle the Soviet troops in Afghanistan.

More significantly, however, the Iran-Iraq War from 1980 to 1988 between the Sunni and Baathist-led Iraq and the Shi'a-led Iran after the 1979 Khomeini revolution engendered acrimony and hostility between the Sunni and Shi'a communities of the region for the first time in modern history.

And finally, the conflict has been further exacerbated in the wake of the Arab Spring

uprisings in 2011 when the Western powers and their regional client states once again took advantage of the opportunity and nurtured militants against the Arab nationalist Gaddafi government in Libya and the Baathist-led Assad administration in Syria.

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